

enough for world history and the framework of civilization to have altered decisively since the initial order, whether by nuclear explosions, coups in the Sino-Soviet bloc, or convincing offers of Soviet surrender, not to mention the discovery of a terrible error.

But that meant there would also be time enough after issuance of an Execute order—as several high-level staff officers told me their superiors worried about—for a presidential change of mind. Fear of that contingency was not the first explanation to be proposed by a control officer for the absence of a Stop or Return order from the authentication envelopes. A common one offered was that if there were two cards in the envelope, one with numbers corresponding to Stop and the other to Go, in the pressure of the crisis the crew member designated to open the envelope might look at the wrong card by mistake. That was pretty feeble as an explanation; if there had been no code received corresponding to a Go card, a Stop code would be unnecessary and meaningless.

The stronger reason given to me in 1960 was that “the Soviets might discover the Stop code and misdirect the whole force back.” This is precisely the explanation given to the president in *Dr. Strangelove* for his lack of ability to send a Stop order to the planes that have been launched by the mad base commander General Jack D. Ripper.

I was dumbstruck by the realism of this point, among others, when I first saw the movie in 1964. Harry Rowen and I had gone into D.C. from the Pentagon during the workday to see it “for professional reasons.” We came out into the afternoon sunlight, dazed by the light and the film, both agreeing that what we had just seen was, essentially, a documentary. (We didn’t yet know—nor did SAC—that existing strategic operational plans, whether for first strike or retaliation, constituted a literal Doomsday Machine, as in the film.)

How, I wondered, had the filmmakers picked up such an esoteric, highly secret (and totally incredible) detail as the lack of a Stop code, and the alleged reason for it? Or, for that matter, the real lack of any physical restraint on the ability of a squadron commander, or even a bomber pilot, to execute an attack without presidential authorization? It turned out that Peter George, one of the screenwriters and the author of *Red Alert*, the novel on